Cross/Bite

I was born into this world sideways.

Doctor said,

surgery, to break my face

set it right again

as if breaking were simple.

Wet places my lips have been:

all the boys I've kissed—

so many caves I've licked

saliva & sweat

holy water on my tongue.

I grind my teeth at night

wake to white sand in my mouth:

nocturnal silt, gritty loam.

My jaws pop when I talk

but if I had the surgery, went cosmetic?

Oh, the typewriter in my bones—

yes, I would miss that click/clack the most.

Cottonmouth

The man's mouth unhinged.

He said I broke my jaw and it open likes this now.

I heard the wet click of little bones unfastening.

~

I woke up before anyone else and walked outside barefoot

to the chilled porch still slick with a thin layer of morning dew.

There was a little coral snake asleep, coiled by a rocking chair.

I wasn't afraid this time.

~

We were told the snake was the most beautiful thing

God created until the snake wanted to be God or like a god

or godlike. I'm not sure now.

~

It happened again—the same dream.

^

I have seen three women give birth and with each contraction the mighty hips break and stretch, the leathery mouth of a snake.

I watched as they writhed inside the all-consuming pain, pure as God, fists clenched, wailing something not quite human, but animal enough.

~

Once, she dreamt she swallowed a snake till she *became* the snake—looping, legless reptile, thick and aching. She woke up paralyzed until she shouted *Jesus*. Her arms grasping the invisible beast, blacking the dark.

~

The guy with the broken mouth baptized me once inside a Pentecostal

church. He said I had to be fully immersed for it to count for heaven, you know.

He said Jesus's name only— No trinity, just Jesus.

Then he touched me under the water. Plucked and dripping, I came

to the surface, and I shouted and they shouted. Everyone's mouths open in praise.

^

The snake hisses like a married man. He measured and whispered slow

You better. Get out. Of my car.

In a way that meant *devour*: to swallow *me* whole—

crystalline sweat stippled across his forehead, his eyes, feral and glinting like two tiger eye gemstones. The street glazed with vulgar light. I felt so vulnerable when the tiny metals unlatched

from my seatbelt

breaking jangled air with delicious clatter.

I was a *good girl* that night, he later said.

^

Lateral undulation:

We swam in the river until we saw a snake muscling the skin of the water with mini ripples—making waves, then circles.

^

... they shall lick the dust like a serpent, like the crawling things of the earth ...

The broken jaw: Eight centimeters now :: Push! Push!

^

All I remember about my grandmother is her pouf of white hair dolloped in her coffin, a cloudy cotton boll.

I snatch the silver snakes out of my black wool hair, a juicy Medusa. Still, I can't wait to be like her—all fog and forgetting.

Am I being eaten, or eating? Who can say, really?

 \sim

So the dream goes something like this:

```
a snake slithered
                            between my legs,
  poured out my
                                     mouth—one long continuous
loop—glossy
                                          glittering scales—voluminous
 muscle—
                                            elongated might—becoming
                                           -my body a circle
 ouroboros
                                          samsara—entering
   becoming
                                      the holy, holy O
    and exiting
      at the center
                                of my deepening
                       meat.
```

~

To creep, to crawl. I crawl. My mother licks the floor with her feet.

I bite John Berryman's tail and Henry runs out of his mouth.

I crawl inside John Berryman's mouth and manumit Henry. Now Henry is free.

Henry, you don't have to talk *like that* anymore.

~

What if he wanted to leave his wife and find another keeled and granular body? His belly travels like a snake. She believes her father is also snake.

 \sim

I have so many dark scars and purpled bruises on my legs.

I have my mother's knees, crunchy and difficult. Everything hurts when I'm about to go to sleep.

The snake is ready for me, shhhhh.

^

Every time she passes this one motel she shivers at the things she did with her body to the man

with the mouth of a snake—all his holy, masculine fire consuming her—whole, she was taken.

After.

He prayed for forgiveness. Not from her. But from God. To make him able and clean again.

She is always in that room

on the bed, naked like prey.

~

I've got two fangs in my mouth that could pierce you. My cross-bite never ground down my teeth.

I used to bite myself in my sleep, but never drew blood. I gave birth to myself—and held myself there. There.